THEY LIVED LIKE THIS: THE ANCIENT MAYA

Marie Neurath & John Ellis

They lived like this

THE ANCIENT MAYA

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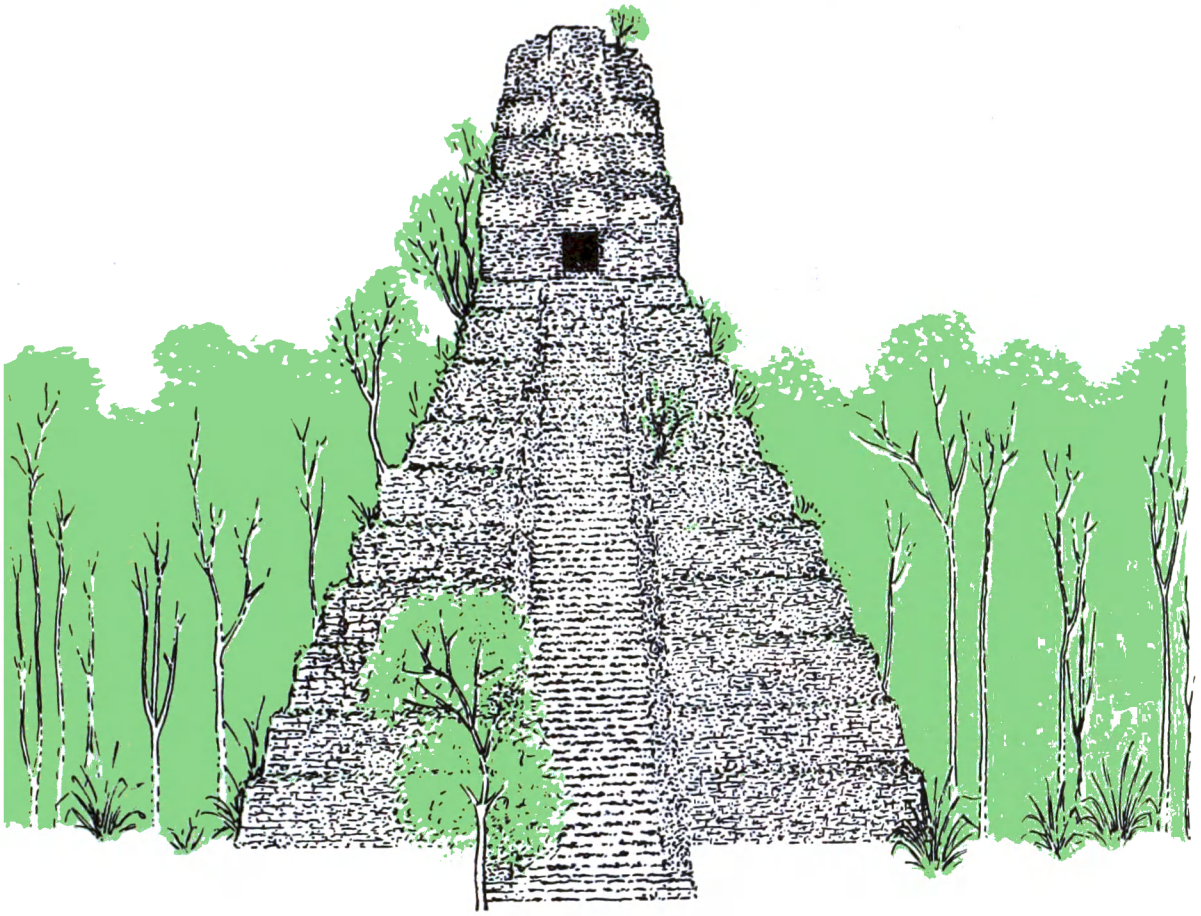
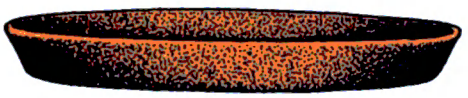
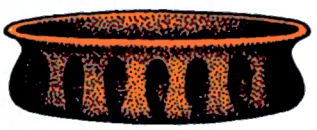


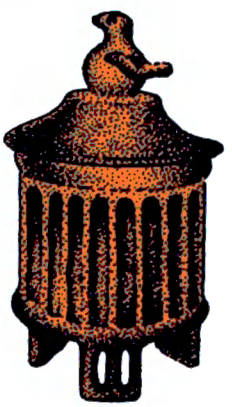
In the middle of the tropical jungle of Central America strange tall buildings have been found, with flights of steps leading to the top. Many people must have worked together to build them. Now we know that these people were the Maya, and that their cities flourished for nearly 1000 years at a time when the Europeans did not know anything about them. When the Spaniards arrived, after the voyage of Columbus, many of the Mayan cities had already been abandoned.

Before any cities were built the people lived a simple life. They found enough to eat in the tropical forest, and with their primitive stone tools, snares and traps they hunted animals. Nothing has been found of their huts. Only pottery has survived from earliest times.





Here are some of their earliest pots and dishes. Later there were other shapes and decorations.



A great change came about when the people learned to become farmers. From amongst their wild grasses there developed one with a much fuller ear: maize. This became their main crop. In their forests grew the cocoa tree, and cocoa was mixed with maize flour and pimento, to spice their food. They also grew sweet potatoes, avocado pears, pawpaws and many other fruits.

They cut down the forest trees with their stone tools and burned them. They used sticks to make holes in the soil for seeds. The priests told them when to start work in the fields. More than before they sought the help of gods to ensure success in their work.

The best beloved of all the gods was the god of maize. In some of the pictures he looks young and beautiful.

This sign, which is used in picture writing, shows him with the maize plant in his hands.

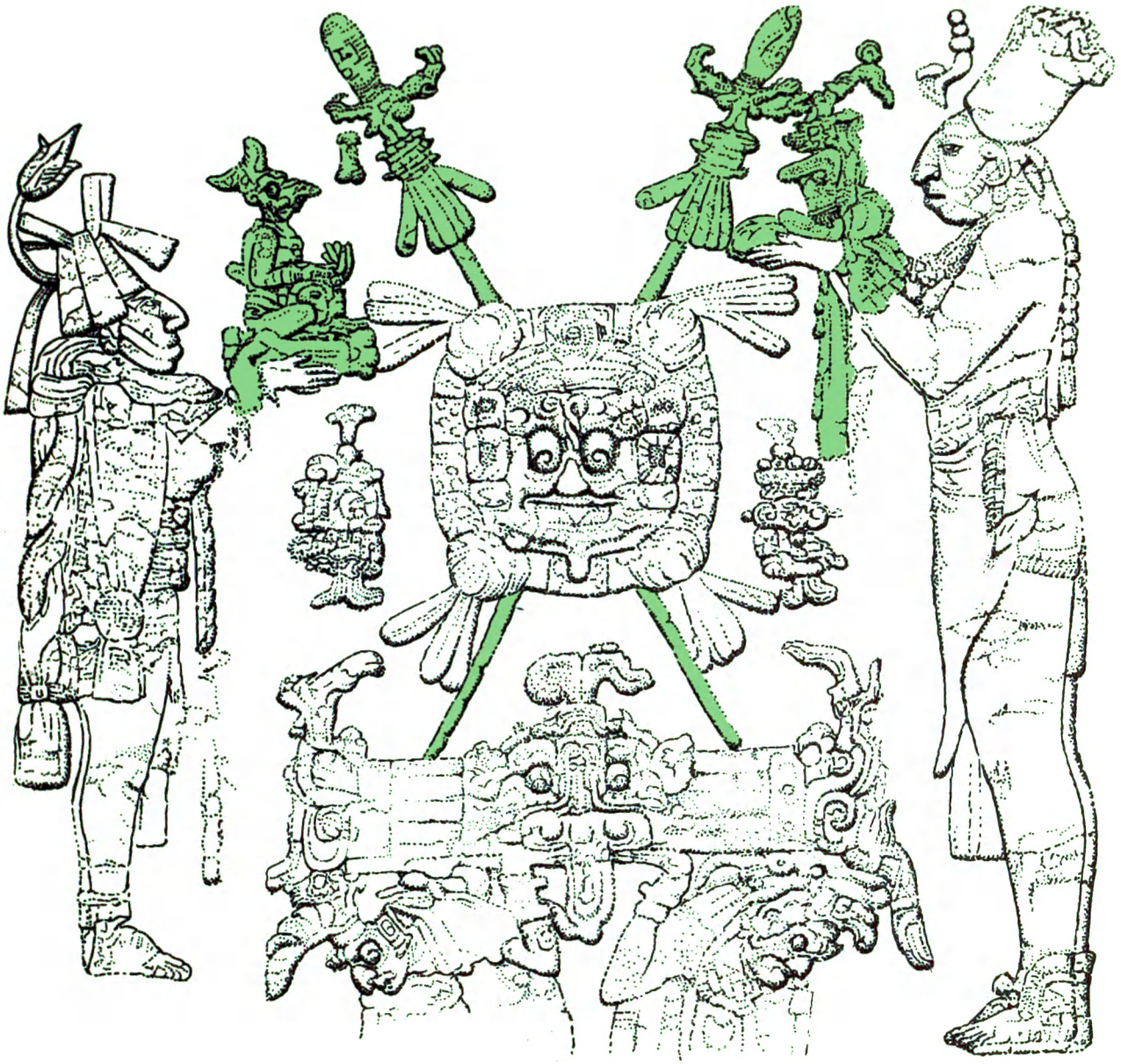
The supreme god and creator was never represented. He was higher than all the other gods and did not interfere in human affairs. These were the responsibility of his son, the sky god, and others associated with him, like the sun god and the moon goddess. Gods ruled over the living and the dead. From them came growth and well-being, calamities and death.

Here are:
the god of the sky,

the god of rain,

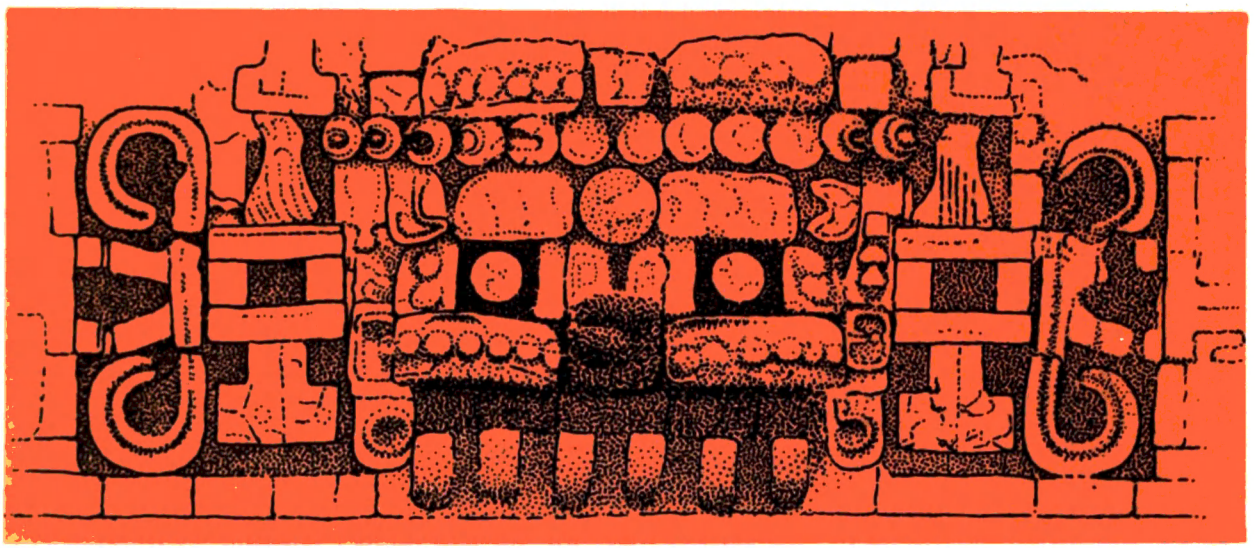
the moon goddess,

and the god of war and sacrifice of men.

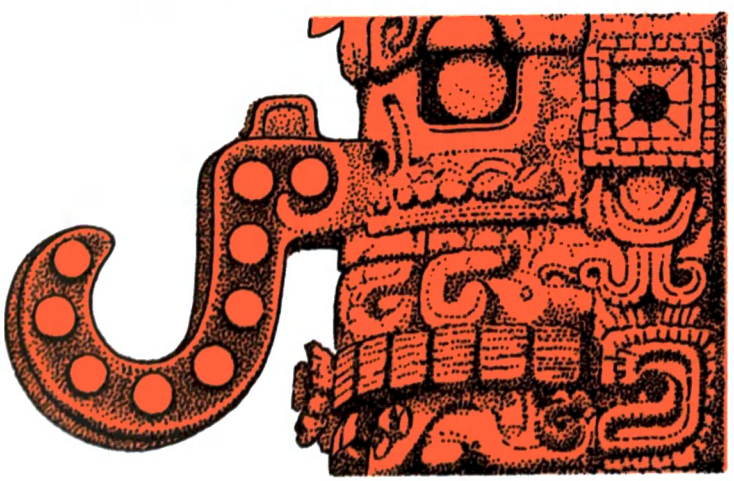


This picture shows two priests making offerings to the sun god. It was the priests' responsibility to obtain the help of the gods. Without them, life could not go on, so every effort was made to honour the gods with temples, prayers and sacrifices.

The sun was scorching and dangerous, droughts would destroy the crops, so help was needed from the rain god. The harvest depended on him more than on the moon goddess of fertility. A strange mask-like shape which can be seen on many buildings represents the rain god.

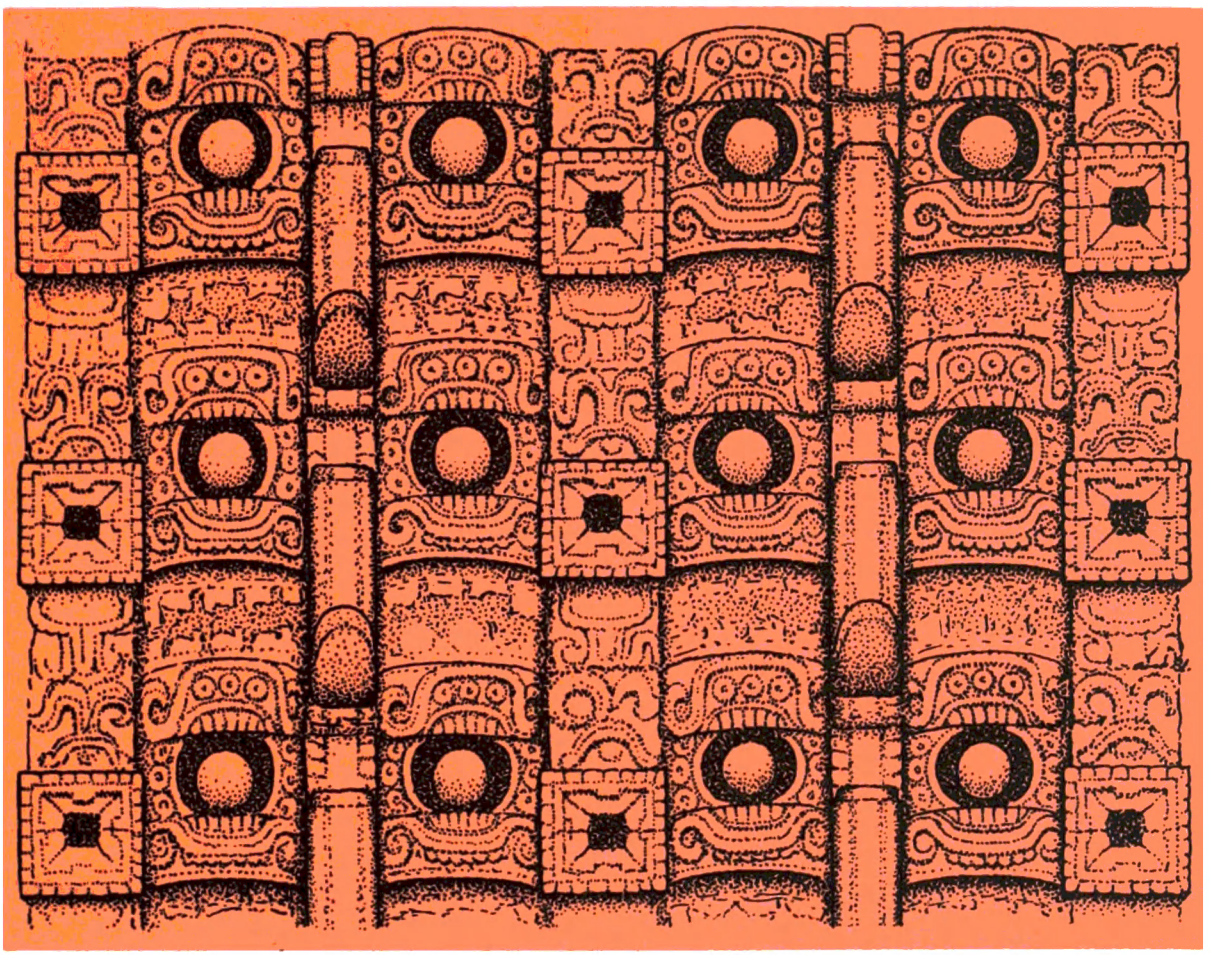


The eyes are large and round, deeply embedded, and the nose looks like an elephant's trunk – though the Maya did not know about elephants.

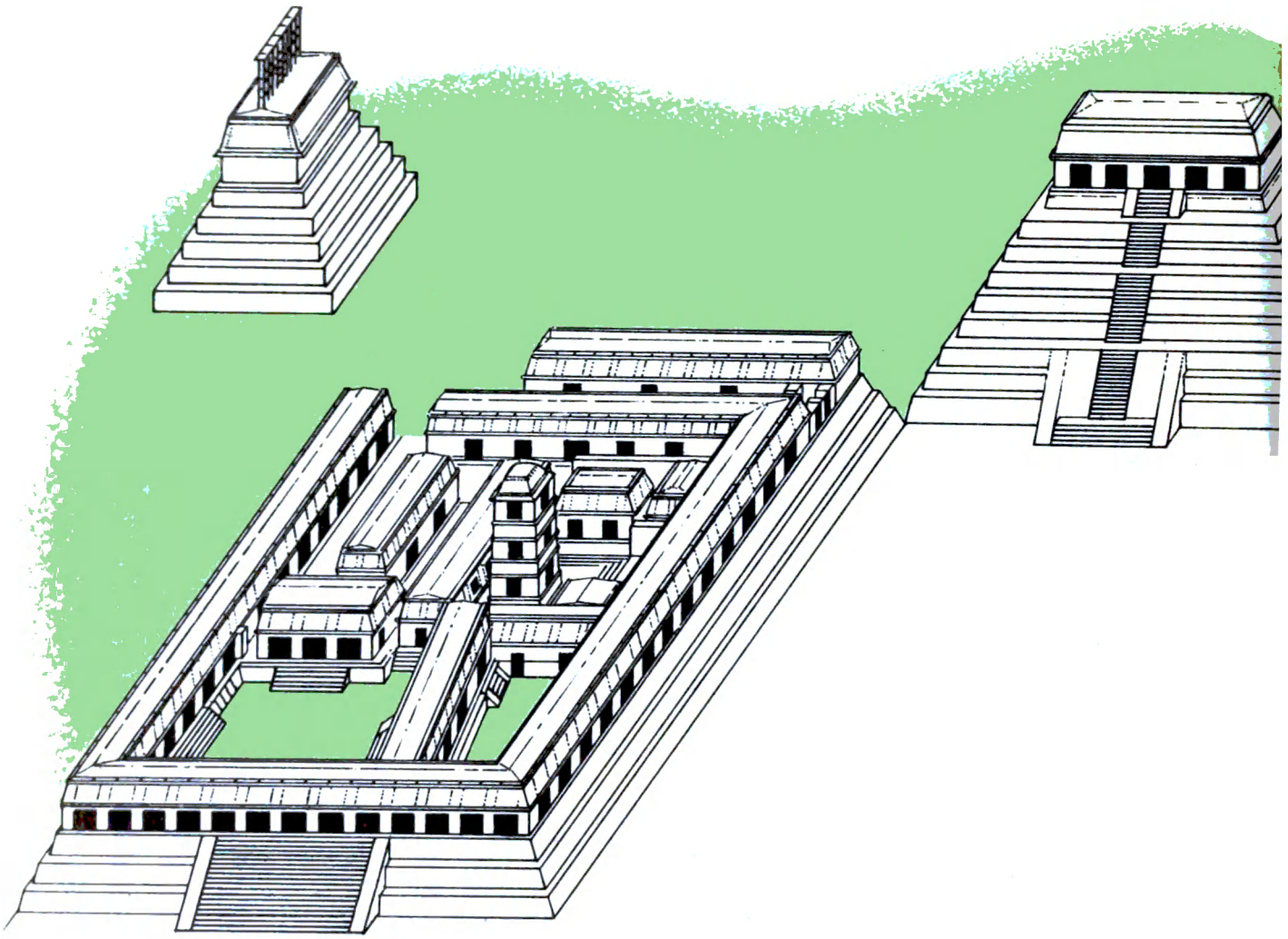


He was a good god, though he also controlled lightning and thunder. These were less feared than droughts, floods and epidemics, which were ruled by evil gods, who had to be feared.

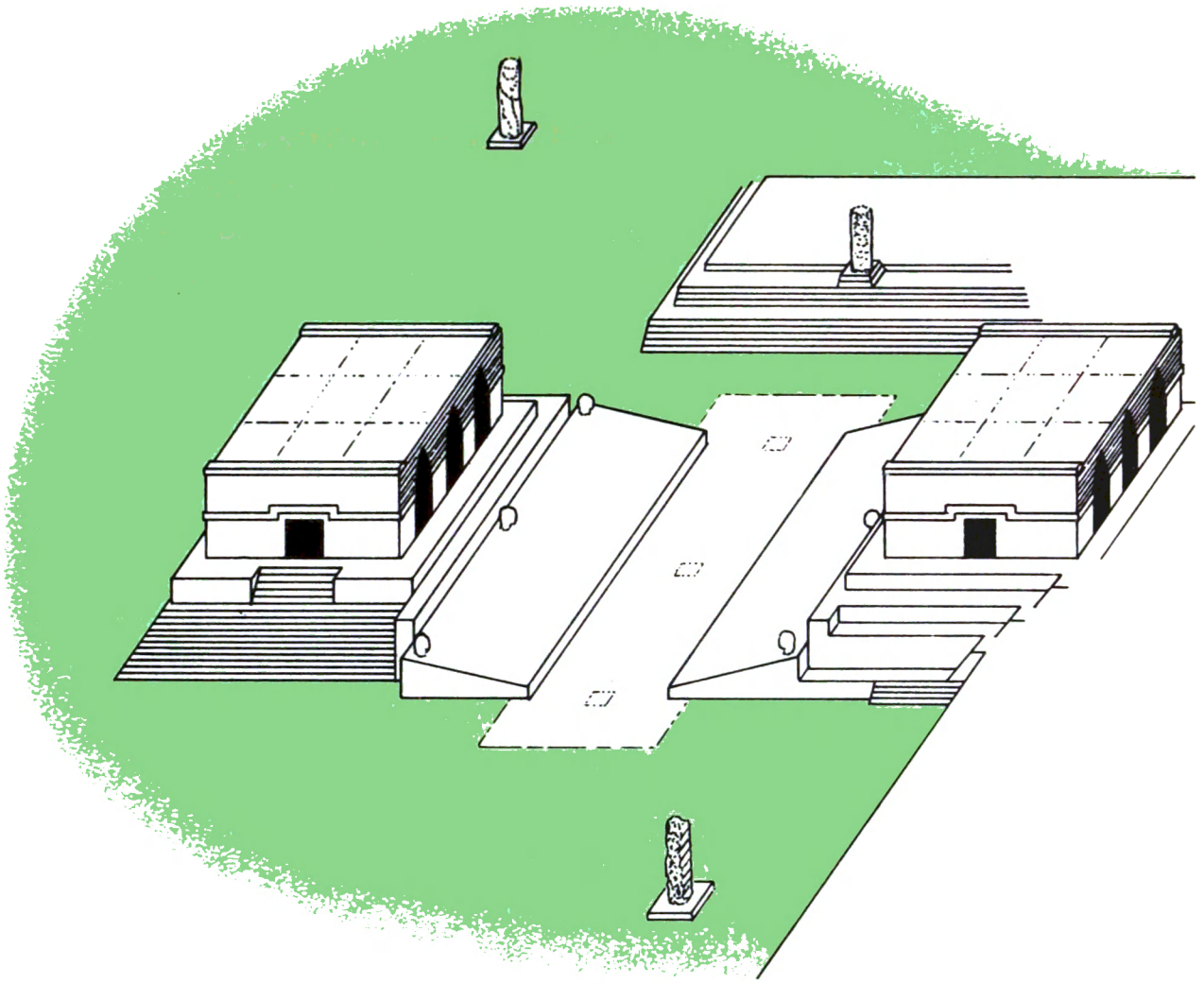
Sometimes a whole wall was covered by masks of the rain god.



Every wall and building in the Mayan cities was built in the service of the gods. There were no houses for ordinary people in the cities. Only chiefs and priests lived there, and perhaps some people who were closely connected with religious services. The farmers lived in suburbs or villages, of which nothing has remained.



Pyramids were built to carry temples – hardly ever as a burial place. Often an old pyramid was covered by a new and more splendid one. On top of a temple roof there was often a single ornamented wall, called a comb, which made it look even higher. Such a comb can be seen on one of the temples in this picture. In the middle is a palace with an open courtyard and a tower.
There were large terraces and many flights of steps.
Dances were performed on the steps and the terraces.

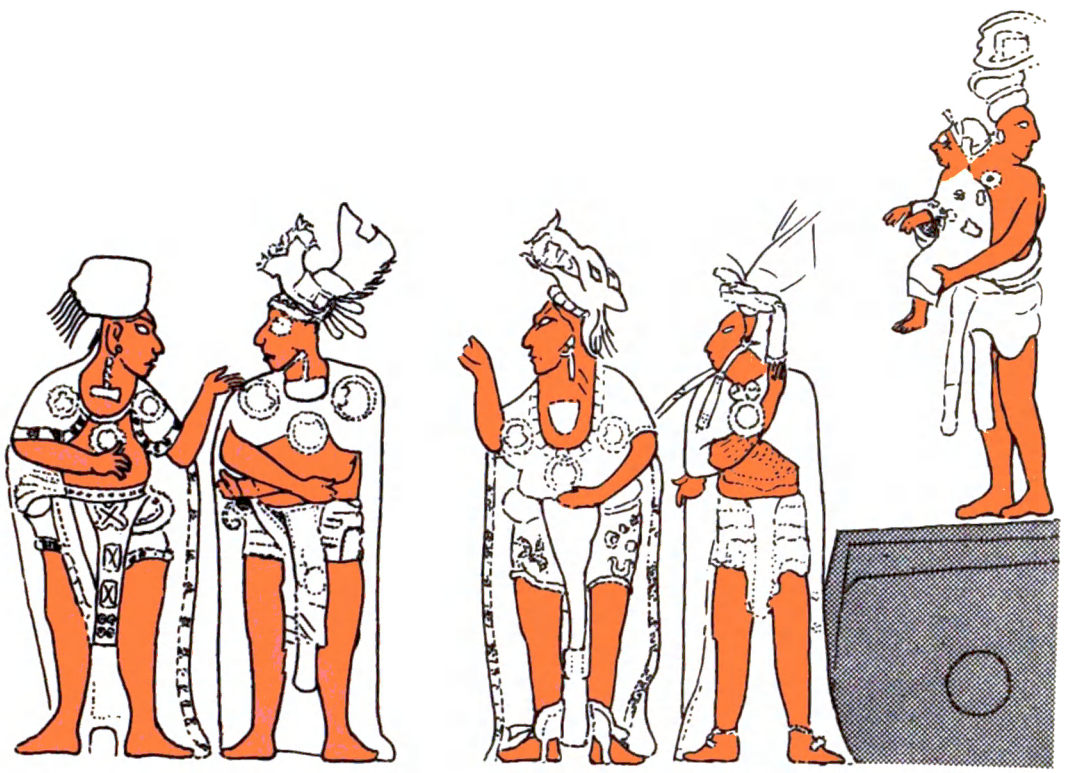


Many temple cities had special courts for the national ball game. They were I-shaped, and some of them had walls with stone rings along the longer sides.
Standing about in some of the temple cities were strange, richly decorated stone pillars. One side usually showed a figure with decorations, and the other sides were covered with square shaped symbols: the form of writing the Maya developed. About 500 different signs have been found, but we can only read about a third of them.

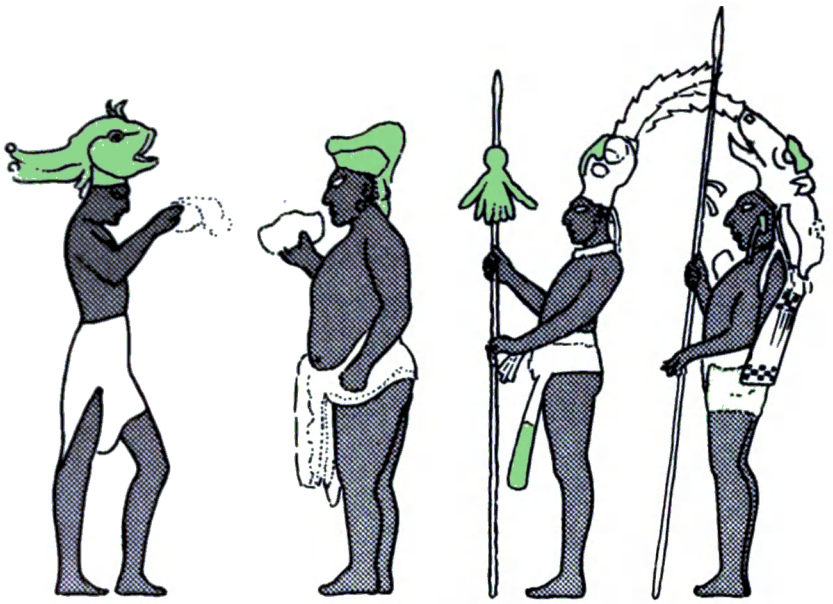
The Maya had strongly curved noses. They often wore a jade ornament over the bridge of their nose which made it look even more pronounced. Their heads had an elongated shape, and their hair was cut in a special way and held with ribbons.

The rich ladies in this picture also have these strangely formed heads. One of the servants is holding a baby which has a bandage around its head. It probably holds the boards which were pressed against the soft skull to give it that elongated shape.

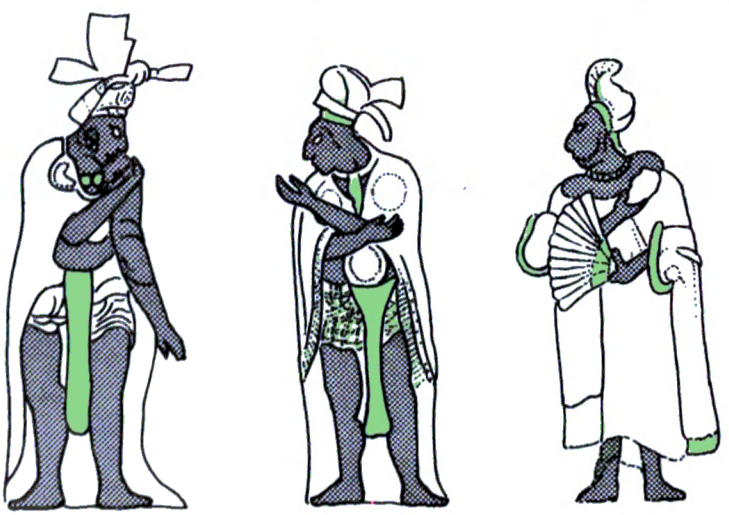
In this scene a baby, also with a bandage, is carried by a servant, who presents it to a group of men. Perhaps this is the name-giving ceremony, which took place five days after birth. Another ceremony marked the end of childhood at the age of 12.



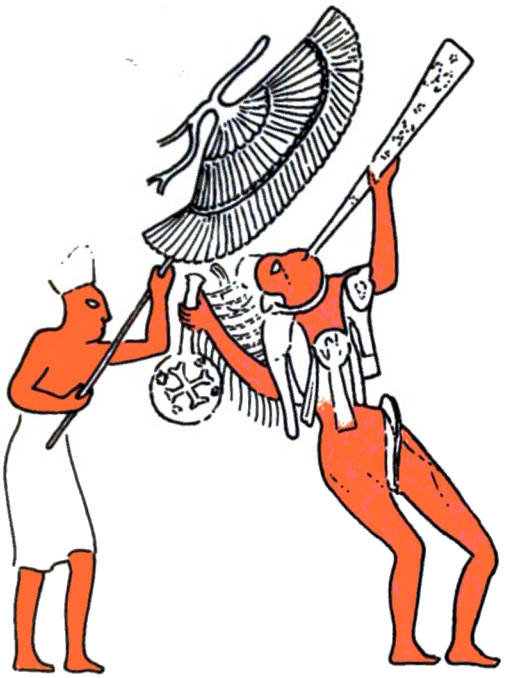
The pictures on this and some of the following pages are taken from Mayan wall paintings.



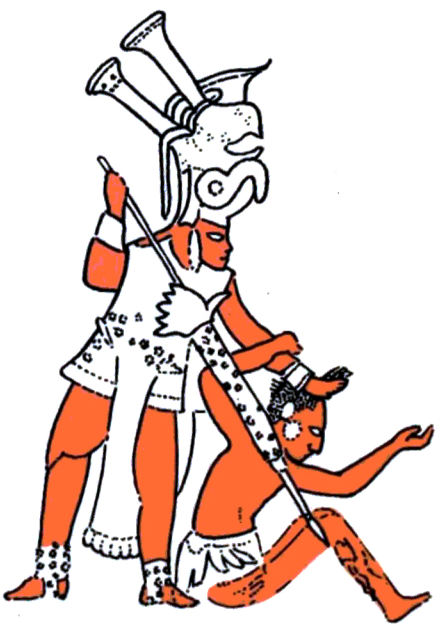
Men at work wore nothing but a plain cotton cloth around their hips. Richer men had coloured materials and added many ornaments, bracelets, necklaces and sandals. Their ear-lobes and noses were often pierced to carry ornaments. Chiefs and their ladies wore coats of many colours and materials, the richest perhaps made entirely of bird feathers. There were many kinds of beautiful birds in the forests. They were caught with snares or shot with pellets blown through a pipe.



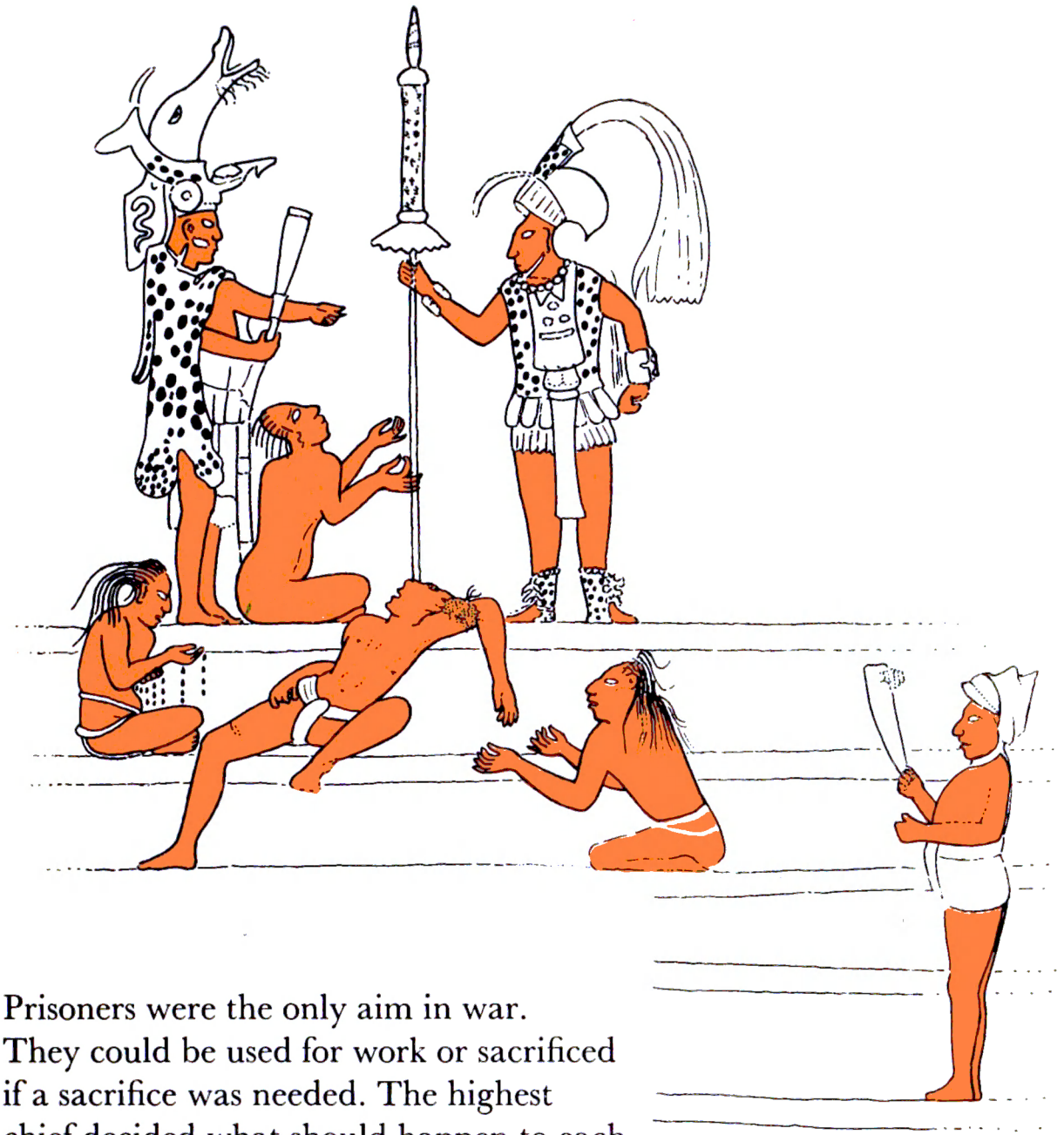
Most elaborate of all were the head-dresses. They made the men look bigger and more awe-inspiring, as they often put the head of a jaguar or other wild animal on top of their own head.
These decorations may have shown to which family a person belonged or what position he held.



One of the duties of the chiefs was to lead in war. Here we see a chief giving orders by means of trumpet call.



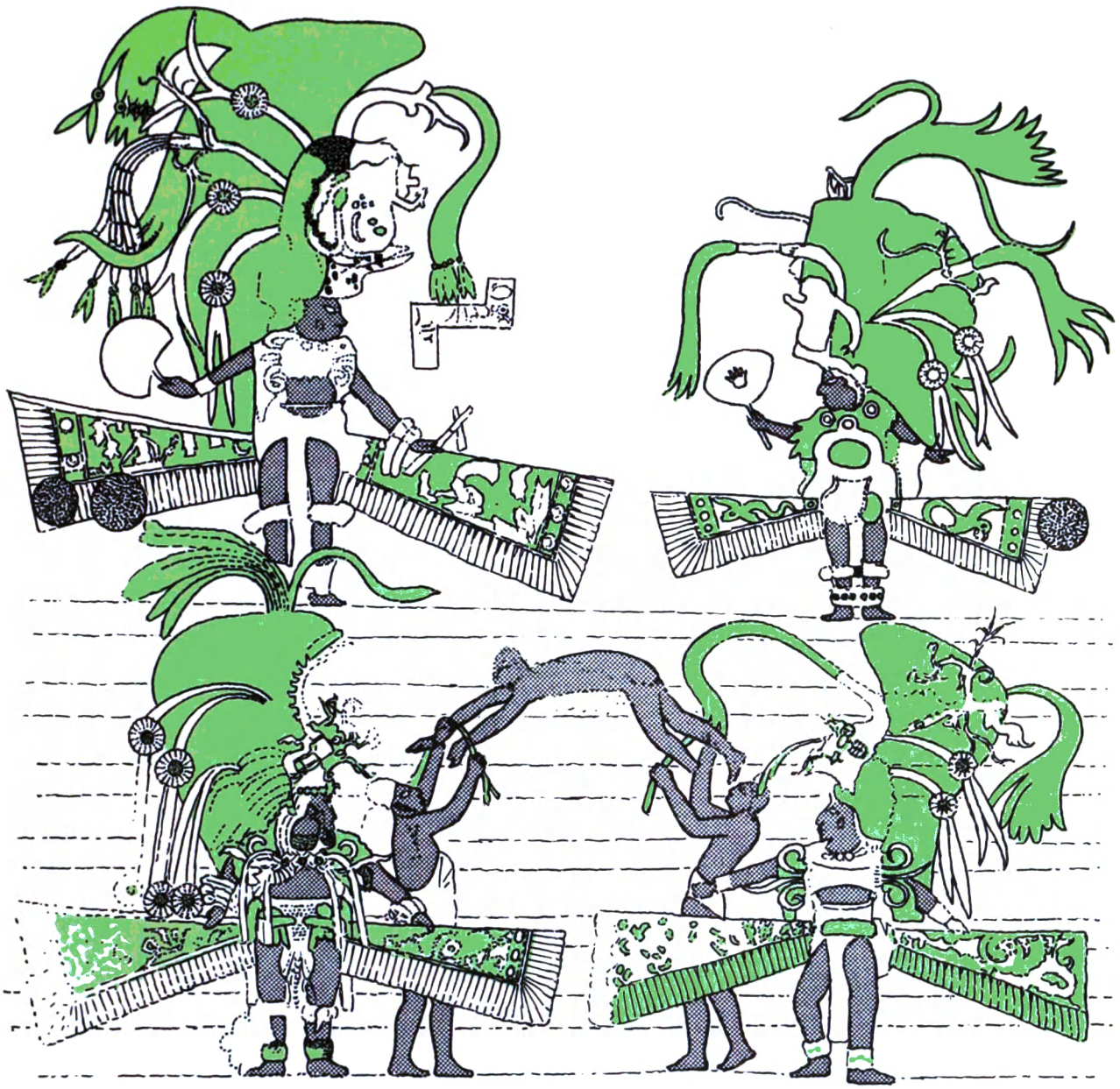
Others take part in fighting – But they are not trying to kill the enemy: men were taken by the hair and threatened with spears until they let themselves be taken prisoner.



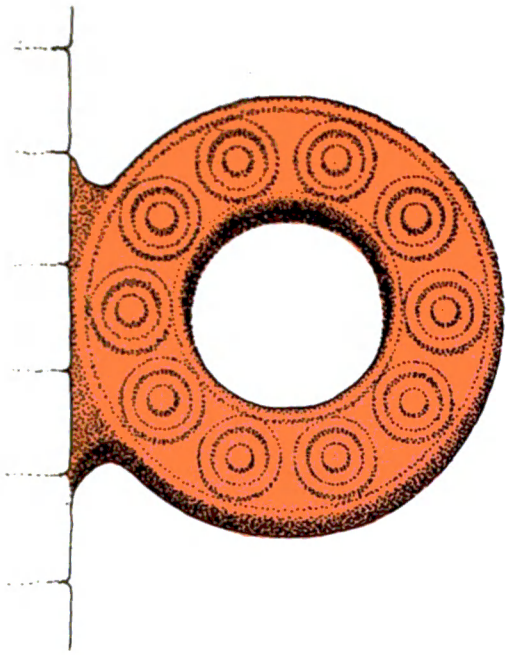
Prisoners were the only aim in war. They could be used for work or sacrificed if a sacrifice was needed. The highest chief decided what should happen to each. Here the prisoners are taken to him.

Here we see a dance performed as part of a religious ceremony.

The musicians played several instruments. Some had large wooden trumpets, others shells from the sea which they struck with a stag's antlers. Others had drums and clapping instruments.

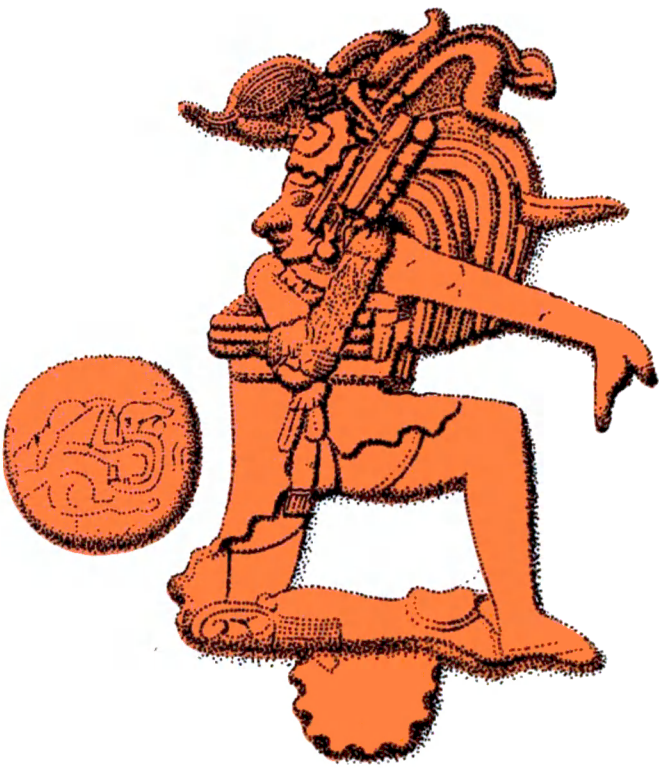


The dancers wore wide-spanned wings and bird-like head-dresses. Here they are seen on the steps leading to a terrace. Between them are two men who hold another man whose hands and feet are bound as if for sacrifice. Perhaps he is a prisoner of war?

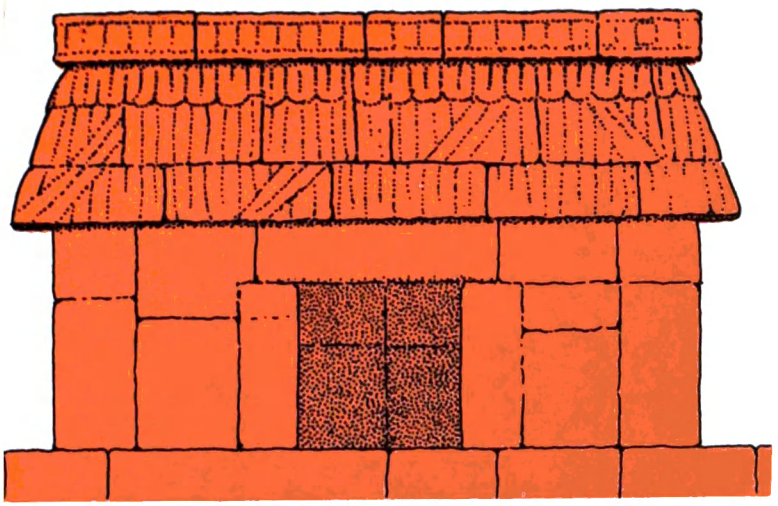


Sports, like dances, were part of religious ceremonies. That is why the ball courts were in the temple cities.

The rules for the ball game were strict: the heavy ball had to be passed through the stone ring, not with the hands, but with hips and elbows.
This picture shows a ball player. The balls were of rubber, made from the sap of a tree.

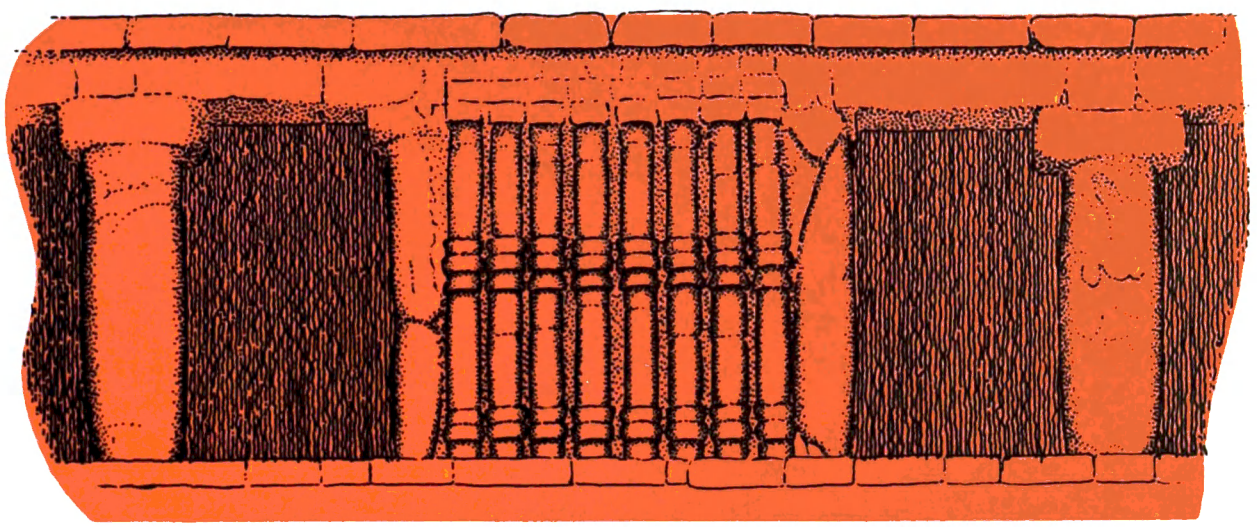


Smaller beads of this material had many uses, both as religious offerings and in daily life. Mothers fixed a bead to their hair to dangle closely before their babies' eyes to make them squint.

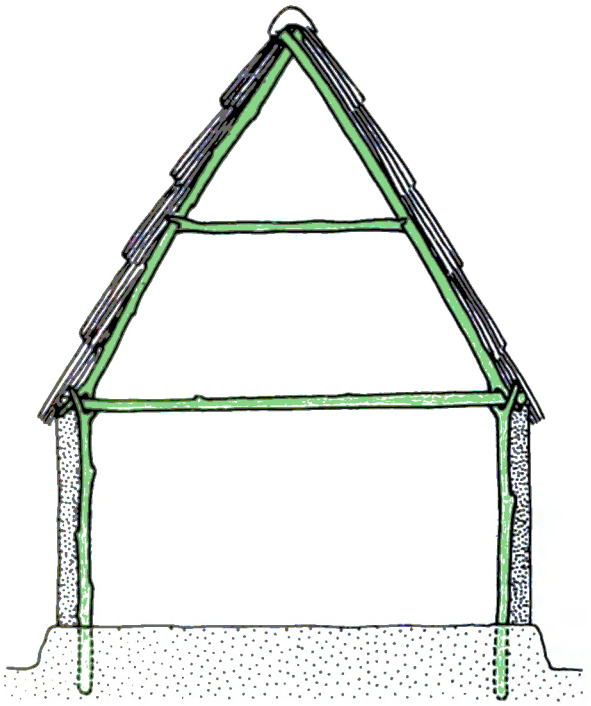


What the houses looked like can only be guessed. This decoration in stone on a temple wall may show a farmer's house with its door and its steep thatched roof.

Another temple wall seems to reproduce in stone what the building technique in wood was like: to make a house wall, wooden stems were set side by side and bound by strong ropes in three places.

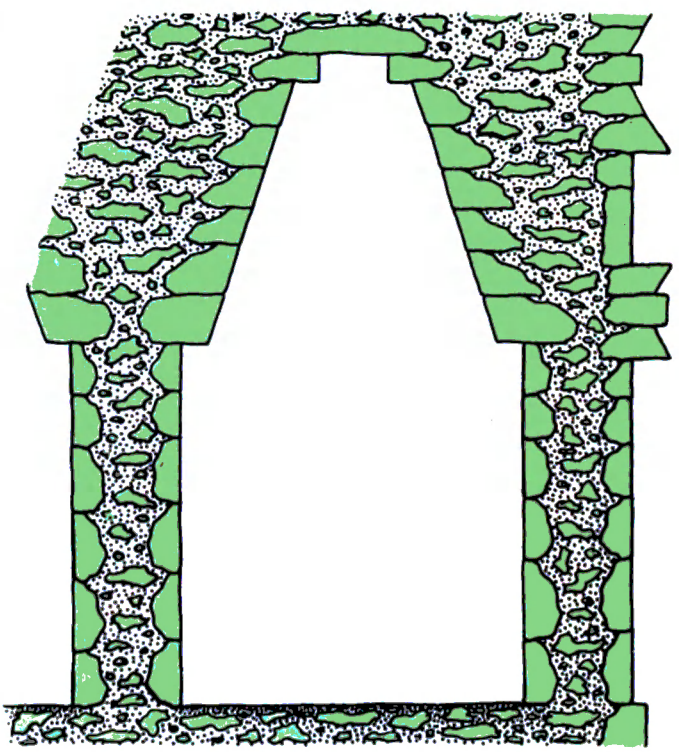


There were also single stems apart from the wall: they held the roof where it extended to cover an open verandah.



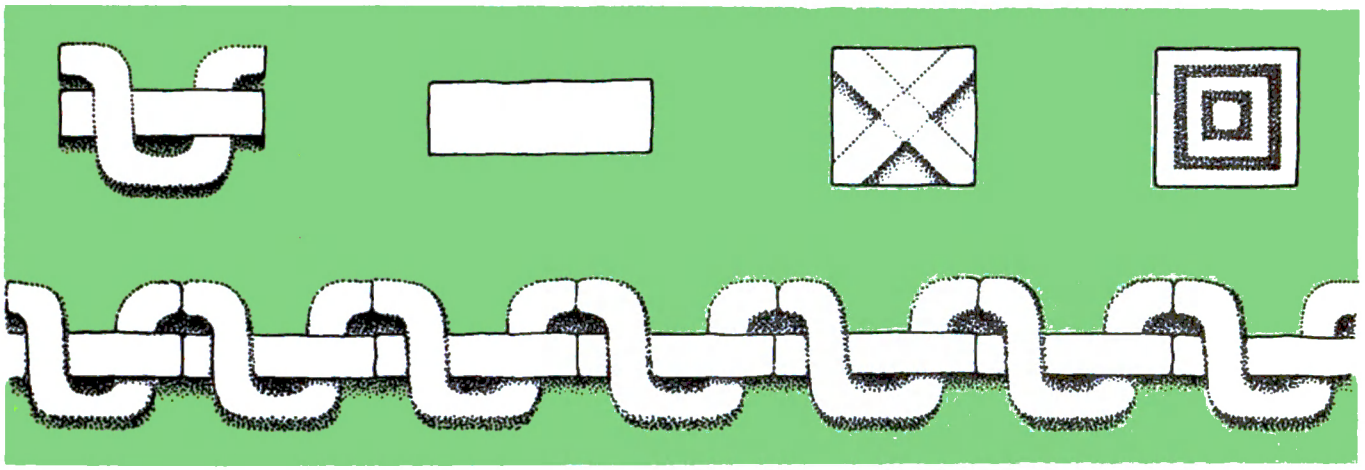
Mayan houses had only one room. There was no ceiling to separate the room from the roof.

This room shape was copied in stone buildings

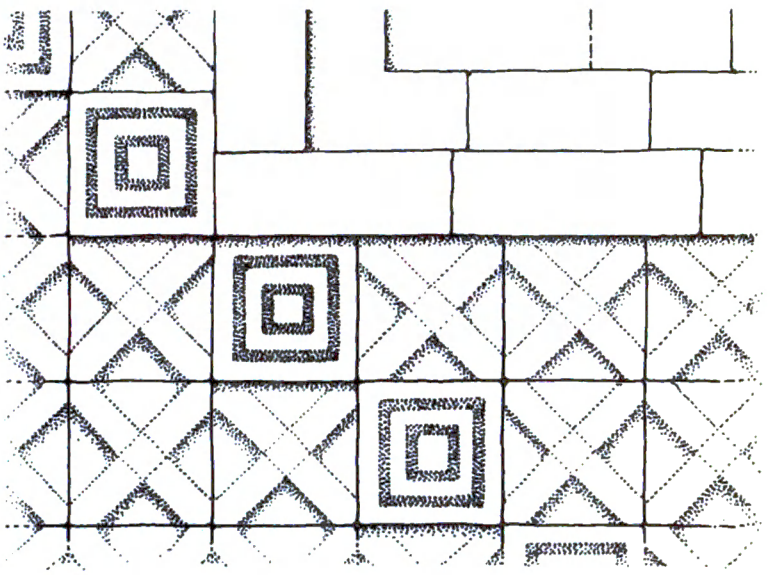


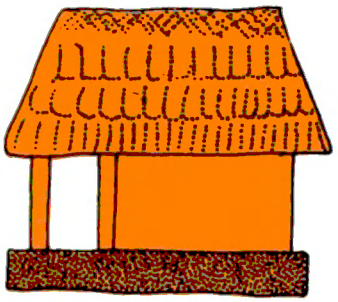
The Maya could not build large rooms. They placed a number of vaulted rooms side by side and connected them with several doorways. They invented a kind of cement with which they built thick walls. Their arches, which took the place of ceilings, were made of cement faced with stone.

Much skill and care was taken over the buildings, and they have survived the destructive power of the jungle for centuries. Mayan tools were very primitive; no metal was used, no wheel, no animal, they tried to simplify work by mass production and pre-fabrication. They designed a number of units with typical decorations like these:



Different decorations were made by putting the units together in different ways for friezes and wall patterns.

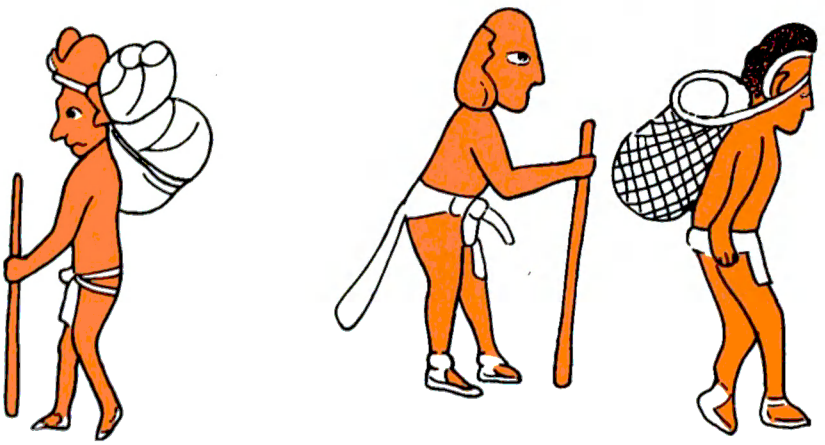




Not only the palaces and temples in the cities but also village huts were built on platforms. Perhaps they had to be protected from flooding after tropical storms.

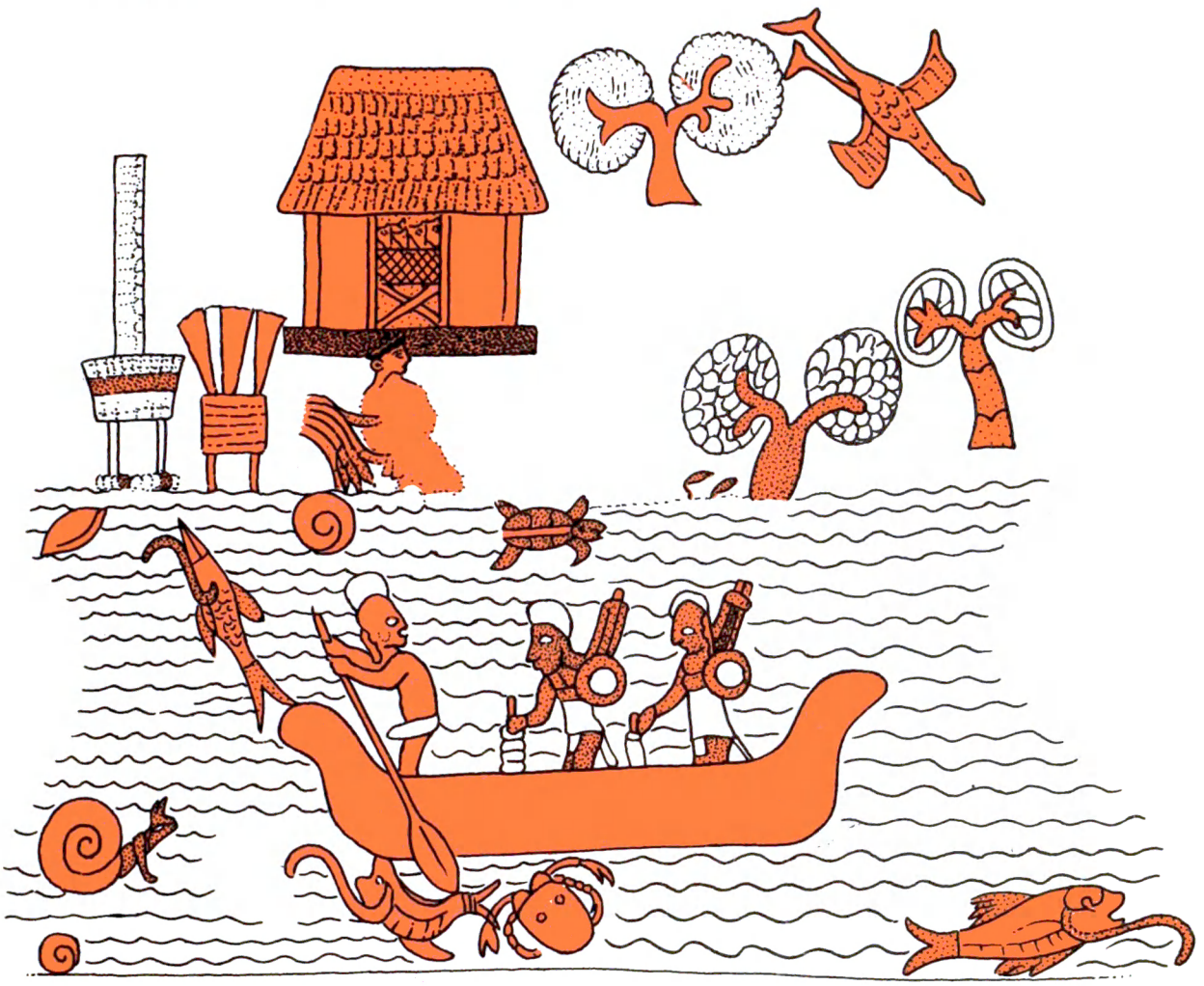
Cooking was done outside the houses. Here a woman is shown sitting near a hearth with a pot on the fire.

The hearth has three stones. The number three belonged to hearths and women, whereas the number four belonged to the earth, the four cardinal points (north, south, east and west) and the men.

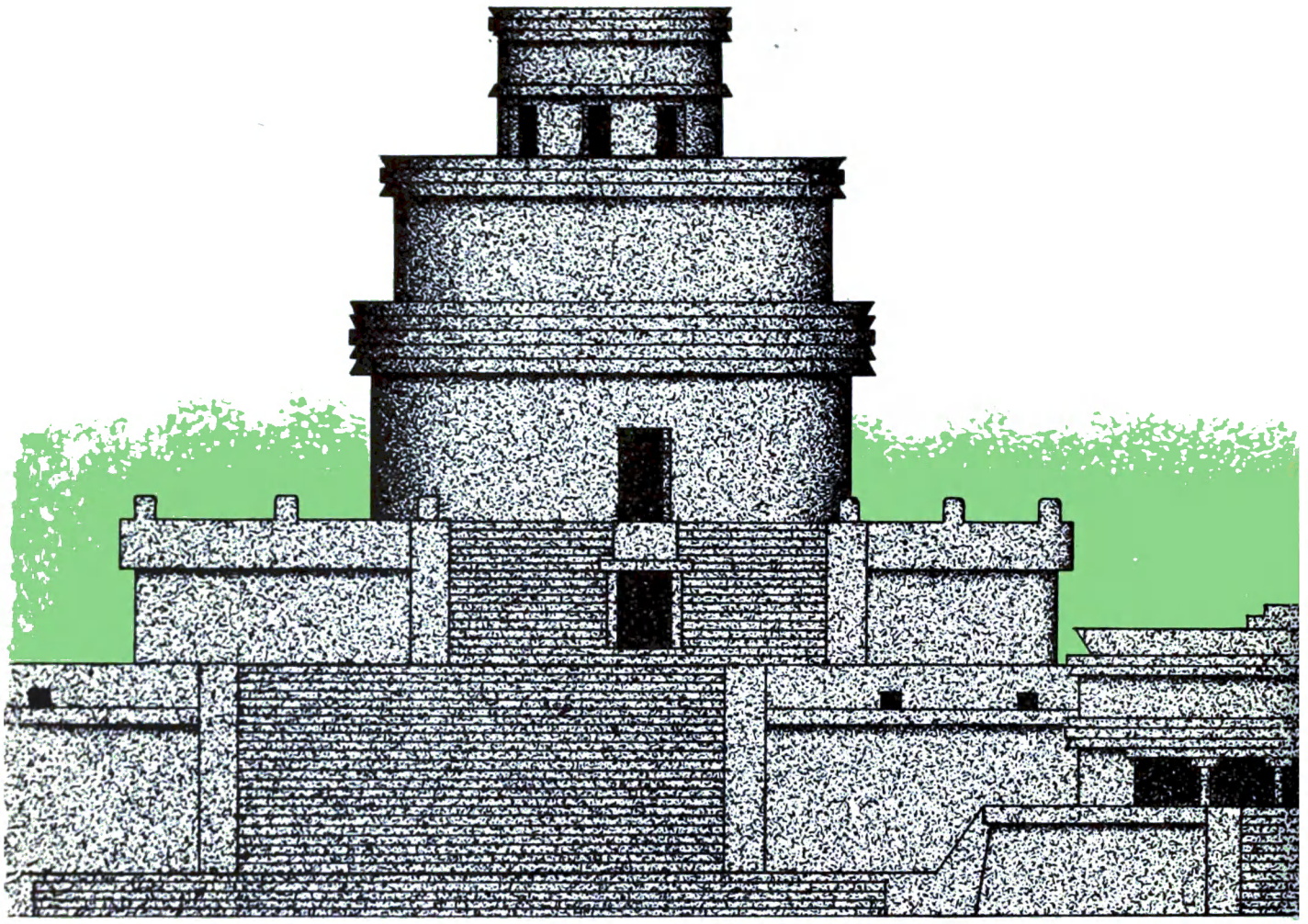


The men in the picture are carrying loads not on their shoulders but with their foreheads. This method can still be seen today.

This village was near the coast. Sea creatures can be seen, and a boat is being paddled along in the shallow water.
Boats were the only transport. There were no roads, except a few causeways built to connect sacred places.

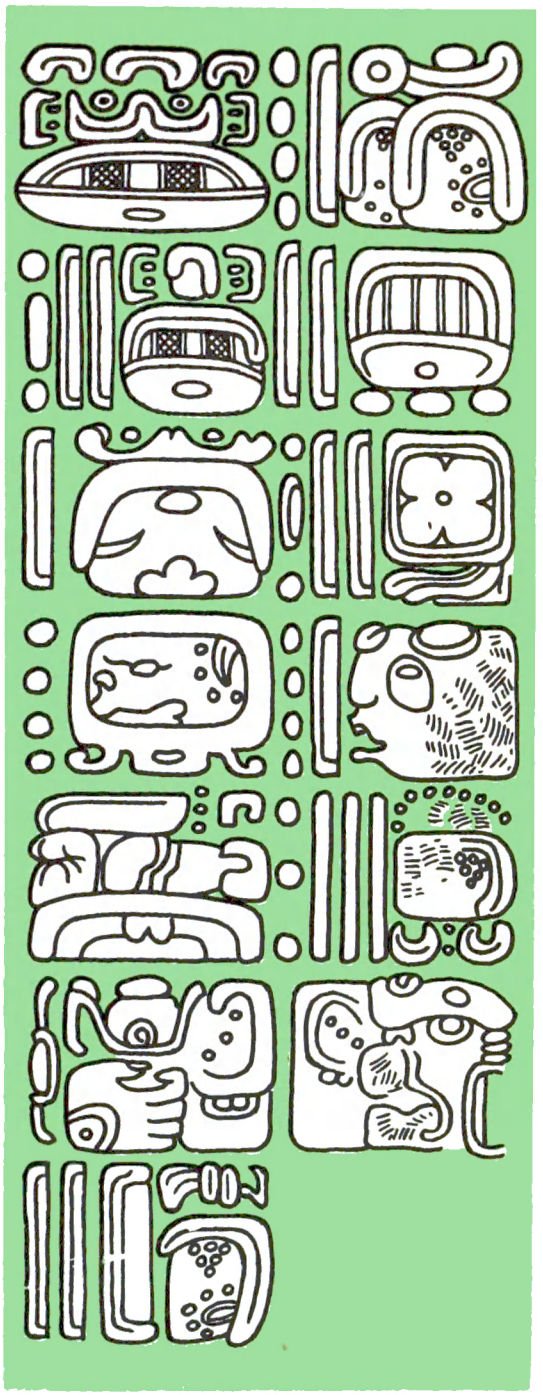


Merchants travelled either by boat or on foot. They sold cloth, ornaments and stones, and brought gold from other countries. Payment was made with cocoa beans.



The priests watched the sun and the stars because they had to know the right time for sowing and sacrifices. They knew the planet Venus and how long it took for it to reappear in the same part of the sky. They wrote a book which recorded the movements of Venus for nearly 400 years. There were special high buildings from which they watched the sky. Winding stairs led to the upper room with several narrow windows which they used to find out when the sun rose and set at specia points on the horizon. The picture above shows such an observatory.

As a result, the priests knew with great accuracy when a year was over. Based on this, they had an exact calendar.



At regular intervals a pillar was erected with its date inscribed. Every day and every month had a name. This inscription from a pillar is a date. It gives not only the names of the day and the month, but also their numbers, and the number of the year counted from some fixed date. The starting point is 3113 B.C. in our reckoning.

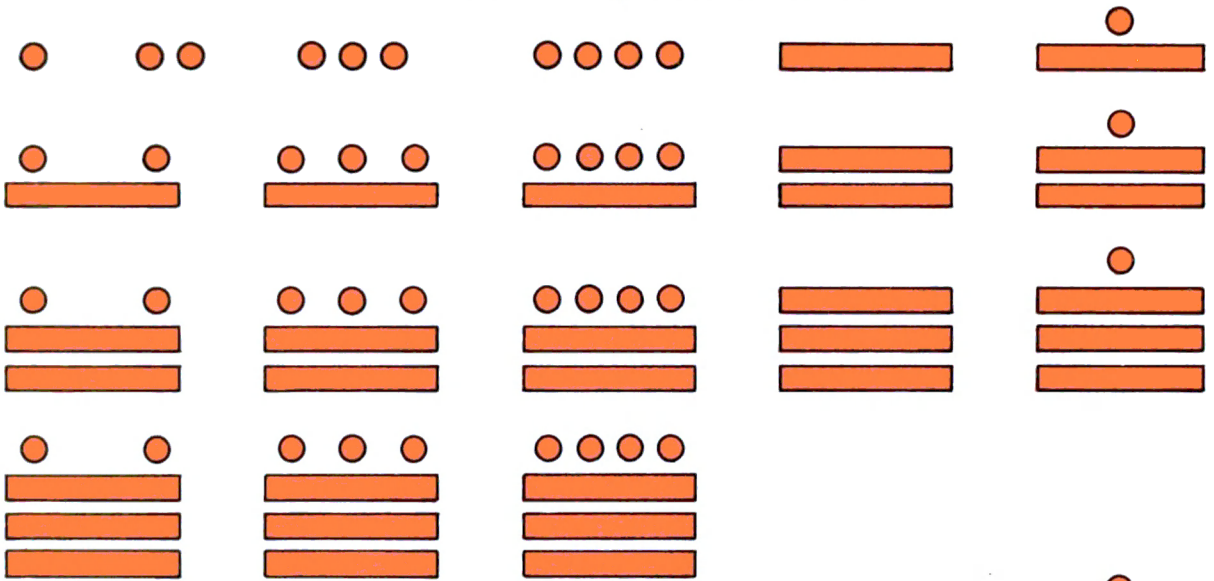
But they had several kinds of years. One was the year of 365 days, known through observation of the sky. A month was 20 days, and 18 months made another unit, of 360 days. Finally, there was a sacred year of 13 months or 260 days. 13 was a lucky number, sacred to the rain god.

In the writing of numbers, 20 had a special position.

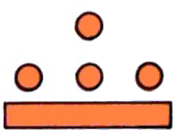
The symbol for 1 is a dot:

The symbol for 5 is a line:

This is how the numbers from 1 to 19 were written:



20 was written like 1, but on a higher level.
The number 28 was written like this:



But in writing 20, there were no first order units,
and a stylised shell took their place:

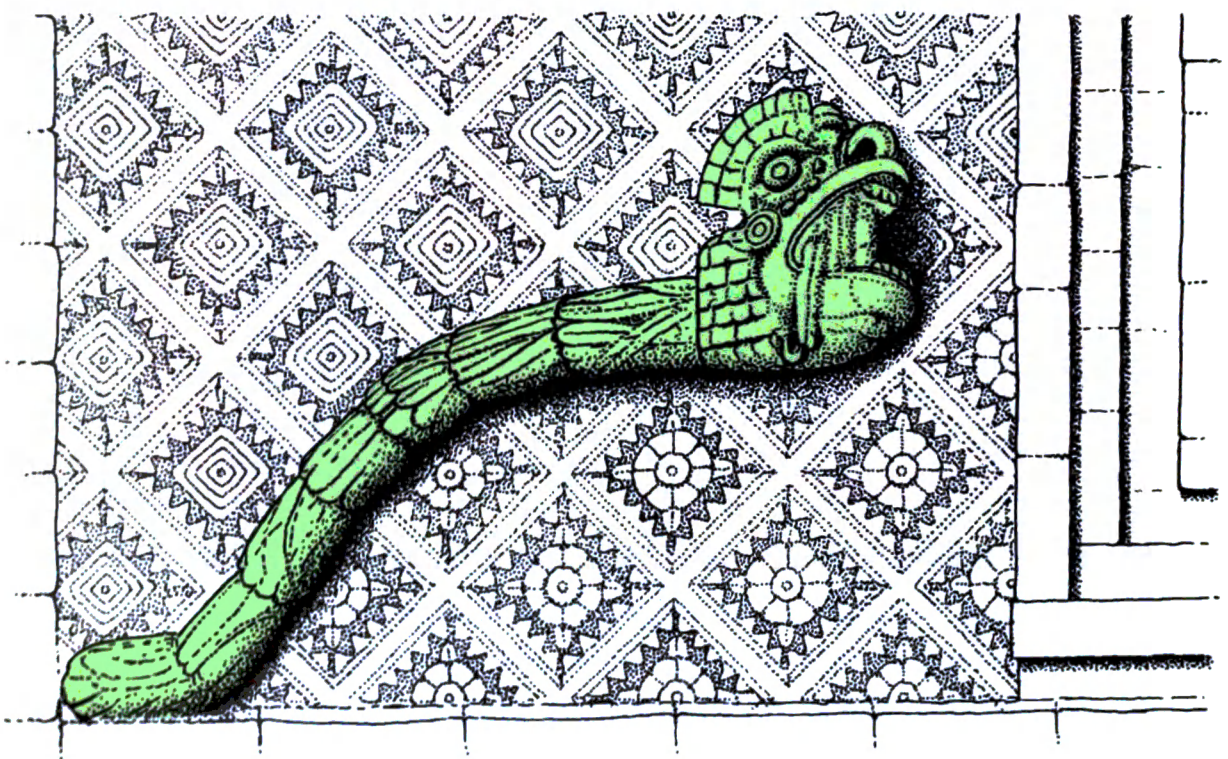
Here are 40, 60 and 100:

All numbers up to 399 could be written on these two levels.
This is the symbol for 400, which is 20 × 20.
It is the first number which needs three levels.

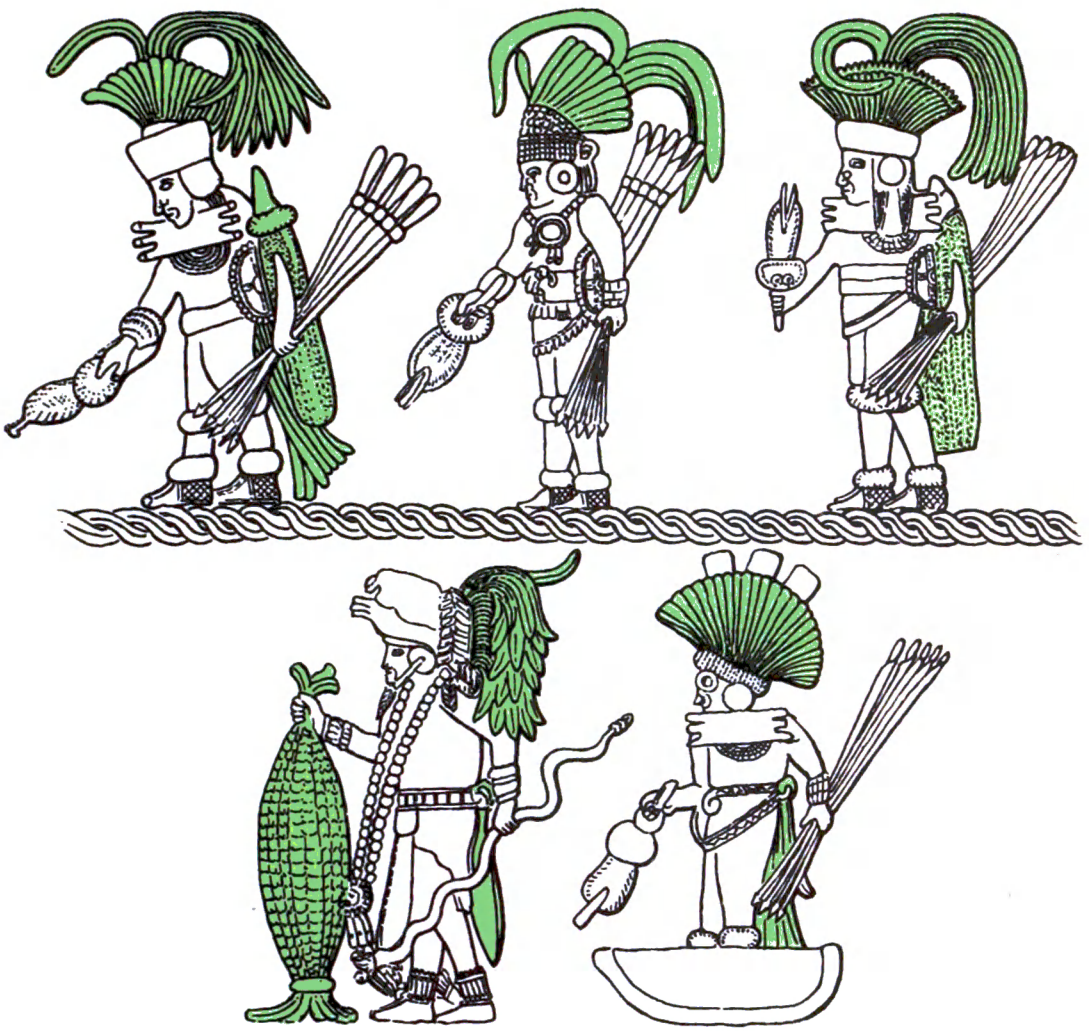
It must have taken a long time to develop a fixed type of writing and numbering, and to collect all the knowledge about the seasons and the years that is shown in the dates. In this early inscription which tells us that it was made in a year which is A.D. 320 in our reckoning, the writing is already fully developed. The same style continued throughout the centuries of the Mayan civilisation.

After about 1000 years the highland towns were abandoned. Perhaps the soil was exhausted, and the prosperity of the people declined. But the smaller towns in the lowlands began to grow.

Then other people moved in from neighbouring countries. They occupied some of the old towns and erected splendid monuments. They also built some new towns. A few centuries of flourishing civilisation followed. Many fine buildings, including more ball courts, were built, and a new sacred creature appeared in the temple sculptures, the feathered serpent, which had for long been worshipped in Mexico.

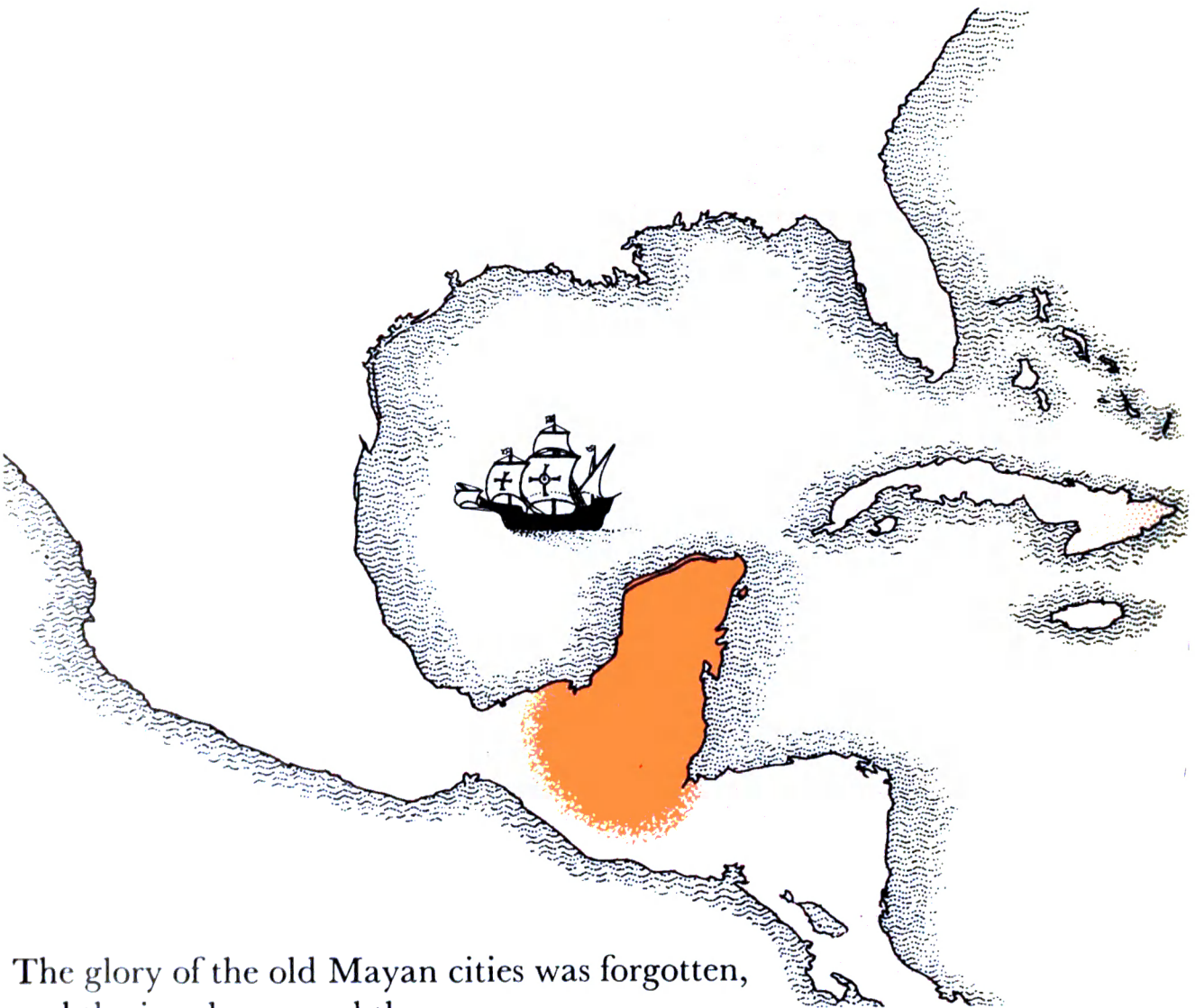


The new people adopted the Mayan language and continued the old customs. But they were more warlike, and they introduced new weapons. They had bows and arrows, spear-throwers and matted shields.



Now some cities formed an alliance and tried to dominate others, and there was more fighting than in early times, with more sacrifices. The population was also reduced by epidemics and hurricanes.

When the Spaniards arrived from Europe they conquered Mexico and gradually occupied the surrounding countries. They spread their Christian beliefs and fought the old religion and its customs. They razed some of the Mexican pyramids and covered others, building Christian churches on top in place of the old temples.



The glory of the old Mayan cities was forgotten, and the jungle covered them.